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ABSTRACT

From 1968 to 1998, the number of tribally controlled colleges in the United States grew to 31. Based on the community college model, they are the only colleges in the world to support and teach curricula, cultures, and languages of their Indian nations. Tribal colleges must work more closely than other institutions with the federal government to secure base funding, and they have become experts at engaging the federal system to ensure their continued existence. The American Indian Higher Education Consortium, the national organization of tribal colleges, was formed to limit tribal rivalries and to pursue members' goals through a united front. Its advocacy resulted in passage of the Tribal College Act, which established the federal government's obligation to fund tribal colleges (although authorized funding levels have never been realized). Underfunding is a chronic problem, and tribal colleges vigorously pursue funding from philanthropic and corporate organizations. Tribal college boards of trustees are nearly 100 percent American Indian, most administrators are Indian, most faculty are non-Indian, but dedication to the students and missions is pervasive. Curricula address tribal needs, ranging from 1-year vocational programs to 2-year associate degrees. Twenty-seven tribal colleges have gained full accreditation, four colleges offer 4-year baccalaureate programs, and others plan to expand to 4-year programs also. Tribal colleges and non-Indian colleges have cooperated well over the years. Contains endnotes. (TD)

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CHAPTER 11

Tribal Colleges: 1968-1998

WAYNE J. STEIN[1]

Tribally controlled colleges are continuing on their 30-year journey of exploration, initiative, and development, which began the summer of 1968 with the founding of Navajo Community College (now Diné College) in Tsaile, Arizona. Tribal colleges can be described as small tenacious institutions of higher education that serve the smallest and poorest minority group in the United States (American Indians) under difficult and challenging circumstances. These colleges are underfunded, overworked, and viewed by the rest of American higher education with some wonder at their ability not only to survive, but to survive with panache.

The development work done by the presidents of the tribal colleges and by the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC), the national organization of tribal colleges, has been innovative and productive. Twenty-five years of persistent labor and cooperation have recently culminated in the development of two additional strong support systems for tribal colleges. These are the Kellogg Foundation's $22 million tribal college initiative program, Capturing the Dream, and the passage of Public Law 103-32, the *Equity in Education Land-Grant Status Act* (1994). The land-grant

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legislation will help to preserve and expand a solid programmatic and financial base for all tribal colleges.[2]

Tribal Colleges[3]

Bay Mills Community College, Brimley, Michigan
Blackfeet Community College, Browning, Montana
Cankdeska Cikana Community College (formerly Little Hoop Community College), Fort Totten, North Dakota
Cheyenne River Community College, Eagle Butte, South Dakota
College of the Menominee Nation, Keshena, Wisconsin
Crownpoint Institute of Technology, Crownpoint, New Mexico
Diné College (formerly Navajo Community College), Tsaile, Arizona
D-Q University, Davis, California
Dull Knife Memorial College, Lame Deer, Montana
Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College, Cloquet, Minnesota
Fort Belknap College, Harlem, Montana
Fort Berthold Community College, New Town, North Dakota
Fort Peck Community College, Poplar, Montana
Haskell Indian Nations University, Lawrence, Kansas
Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico
Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa Community College, Hayward, Wisconsin
Leech Lake Tribal College, Cass Lake, Minnesota
Little Big Horn College, Crow Agency, Montana
Little Priest Tribal College, Winnebago, Nebraska
Nebraska Indian Community College, Macy, Nebraska
Northwest Indian College, Bellingham, Washington
Oglala Lakota College, Kyle, South Dakota
Salish Kootenai College, Pablo, Montana
Sinte Gleska University, Rosebud, South Dakota
Sisseton Wahpeton Community College, Sisseton, South Dakota
Sitting Bull College, Fort Yates, North Dakota
Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute, Albuquerque, New Mexico
Stone Child Community College, Box Elder, Montana
Turtle Mountain Community College, Belcourt, North Dakota
United Tribes Technical College, Bismarck, North Dakota

To understand the true nature of tribal colleges, one must study their histories, missions, participants, and structures.[4] Potential benefits of such a study were acknowledged when the Kellogg Foundation convened a gathering of higher education administrators in

Albuquerque, New Mexico, in February 1996 to explore the Capturing the Dream initiative. The consensus of the participants was that everyone in higher education had much to learn from these newest members of the higher education community. The nontribal college administrators present agreed that the ability to serve students and communities under very difficult circumstances holds many lessons for other higher education institutions. Such service has come with a price, but it is one that those who make up the tribal college movement are willing to pay.

History

American Indian education, like so much of the Indian world, had been destroyed by the time of the twentieth century and replaced with an education system designed and managed by European Americans to convert Indians into pale-brown imitations of themselves. It took the upheaval of the mid-twentieth century—with the Great Depression of the 1930s, World War II in the 1940s, and the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s—coupled with more enlightened legislation concerning American Indians to lay the groundwork for change in American Indian education. But serious change for American Indian education began when councilmen Guy Gorman and Allen Yazzie, Navajo Nation chairman Raymond Nakai, and educators such as Ned Hatathli, Robert Roessel, and Ruth Roessel founded Diné, Inc. with the intention of taking control of the education of Navajo students. Higher education was one area of Indian education that the founders of Diné, Inc. desired to affect immediately. An attrition rate of 90 percent or more experienced by Navajo students attending off-reservation colleges demanded innovative solutions. The participants in Diné, Inc. began exploring the possibility of a community college for the Navajo people.[5] The idea for a tribal college had been put forth before, as recently as the 1950s, by Robert Burnette of the Rosebud Sioux (Sicangu Lakota), but lack of human and fiscal resources forced him to postpone the dream of a tribal college on Rosebud for some 20 years.[6]

The 1960s were an era of exciting expansion in higher education, with community colleges playing a major role. Toward the end of the decade, a new community college opened its doors each week somewhere in the United States. Within this historical tradition, tribally

controlled colleges made their appearance on the U.S. higher education scene.[7]

Tribal colleges are in many ways different from nontribal community colleges; some have even grown to be more than two-year colleges by adding selected four-year programs to their curricula. While their missions are similar, tribal colleges are unique. They are the only colleges in the world to support and teach curricula, cultures, and languages of their Indian nations. Tribal colleges must work more closely than other institutions with the federal government to secure base funding, and they have become experts at engaging the federal system to ensure their continued existence. However, it was what the community college movement represented that led the founders of the tribally controlled colleges' movement to choose this precise model of higher education as the most appropriate to meet their people's needs.[8]

Today the tribal colleges and their sister non-Indian institutions generally remain separate in the political, educational, and fiscal arenas, but not in spirit. An atmosphere of mutual trust and appreciation does exist between the two systems.[9]

The founding of Navajo Community College in July 1968 broke the ground for a number of other individuals across Indian country to establish colleges. The 31 tribal colleges currently operating across the United States and Canada demonstrate the success of the tribal college movement.

American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC)

Leaders of the fledgling movement recognized in 1972 that unity among the small number of tribally controlled colleges was essential to promoting the tribal colleges as viable options for Indian people in higher education. They also understood that a united front allowed them to reach their goals as a movement more easily and help limit the natural tendencies of tribal rivalries and differences to create havoc within this unique movement. Thus, the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) was born of political necessity.[10]

AIHEC has played numerous roles as the national representative of tribal colleges over the 26 years of its existence. Possibly its most important role has been that of advocate in Washington, D.C., for the

tribally controlled colleges, charged with securing and maintaining the principal funding source of the colleges. The tribal colleges interact with the federal government much as state-supported institutions do with their state governments. AIHEC's greatest achievement to date was convincing Congress and President Carter in 1978 that funding the tribal colleges was part of the federal government's trust responsibility based upon American Indian treaty agreements with the government. The *Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act* (TCCC) of 1978, known familiarly as the Tribal College Act, has had a stabilizing influence on the tribal college movement. Implementation of the act meant the difference between life and death for a number of the fiscally stressed tribal colleges. One of the greatest disappointments is that the federal government has never funded the tribal colleges at the level authorized in the Tribal College Act but has continually underfunded them in its annual appropriations to the colleges.

Funding

The 1983 congressional reauthorization of the Tribal College Act allots $5,280 per American Indian FTE (full-time equivalent student). Based on the Consumer Price Index over the past decade, the authorization should now be $8,450 per FTE to keep pace with inflation. Either figure is considerably higher than the actual amount of $2,900 per FTE appropriated in the 1996 federal budget. To keep the funding of tribal colleges in perspective, these figures need to be compared to the national average cost for mainstream nonresident community colleges (that is, without dormitories)—approximately $7,000 per FTE, according to the National Association of Colleges and Business Officers.[11]

The tribal colleges do seek funding vigorously from a number of other federal agencies and sources (other than the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the *Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act* funds). They look to philanthropic organizations such as the Kellogg Foundation and corporate foundations such as U.S. West; they also have established their own foundation, the Tribal College Fund. These funds are targeted to specific tasks outlined by the individual colleges and are generally competed for by tribal colleges and other institutions of higher education.

These additional funds can be instrumental in carrying forward much needed educational programs within tribal colleges. A recent $12 million grant awarded by the National Science Foundation to Oglala Lakota College and Sinte Gleska University for a five-year period illustrates the value of such supplementary funding. Oglala Lakota College will develop a bachelor of science degree in environmental science; Sinte Gleska University will develop a bachelor of science degree in computer science with a software engineering emphasis. Sinte Gleska is also creating a two-year degree program in basic engineering.[12]

Tribal college boards of trustees are a reflection of their communities. All tribal colleges are controlled by boards of trustees that comprise nearly 100 percent local American Indian community members. These boards act as buffers between tribal politics and the colleges, and also act as mediators among policy makers, personnel selection committees, and local watchdogs of and for the tribal colleges. These important responsibilities make tribal college boards of trustees unique in Indian country because of their autonomous authority as granted by the college charters. Most American Indian decision-making entities (including tribal governing councils) must seek the approval of the Secretary of the Interior for their important decisions; tribal college boards of trustees do not. However, board members do keep in mind how their decisions will impact their communities and long-term relations with their chartering tribal governments.

Administrators and faculty of tribal colleges are a mixture of American Indians and non-Indians. Most administrators are American Indian, but most faculty members are non-Indian. Whatever the race of tribal college administrators or faculty members, the strongest characteristic of both groups is dedication to the students and the missions of colleges. The accreditation associations evaluating the tribal colleges, in almost every report made over the past 20 years, have written about the importance of the dedicated administrators and faculty.

Faculty problems experienced by tribally controlled colleges generally fall into three main areas. First is the difficulty in finding and keeping science and mathematics instructors. Second is the high turnover among faculty, who often find life on Indian reservations too isolated and culturally different. Third and toughest to solve is

the fact that, as the colleges mature and student populations grow, salaries generally remain low. The issue of underfunding is serious, and nowhere is it more serious than in recruiting, hiring, and keeping good faculty, administrators, and support staff.

Curricula

Tribal colleges pay particular attention to developing curricula and programs in response to tribal community needs. A typical academic and teaching curriculum offered today at a tribal college would comprise two-year associate degrees in arts, science, and applied science and one-year certification programs.

Associate of arts degrees are academic programs designed to prepare students who intend to further their education by transferring to a four-year higher education institution. Typical areas of study include general studies, business administration, tribal or Native American studies, and the social sciences.

Associate of science degrees are also designed to prepare students wishing to transfer to four-year colleges or universities upon completion of their education at a tribal college. Typical courses of study are business administration, health sciences, and pre-engineering.

Associate of applied science degrees combine practical course work and general education, designed to prepare students for immediate entry into the work world the day after graduation. Typical disciplines for associate of applied science degrees would be human services, computer science and information systems, tribal language arts, office technology, and tribal administrative practices.

One-year certificate programs are designed by the tribal colleges to respond to local community employment opportunities. Students are taught within a sharply focused vocational program with much hands-on practical experience. Such programs are as wide-ranging and diverse as the communities and tribal colleges that create them. General office skills, health sciences, hospitality, automotive trade skills, and manufacturing assembly are examples of certificate programs from just one tribal college.[13]

Four tribal colleges, Sinte Gleska University, Oglala Lakota College, Haskell Indian Nations University, and Salish Kootenai College, have established four-year baccalaureate programs in human resources, social sciences, and education. Sinte Gleska University

has also developed and received accreditation for the first tribal college master's degree program in education. This achievement marks a major stride by tribal colleges in curriculum development, considering the financial hardships and isolation they have endured. This growth is dramatic because in 1972 Sinte Gleska University (then Sinte Gleska College) offered only 22 courses in scattered disciplines from psychology to math, with 13 administrators and faculty making up the college staff.[14]

AIHEC has identified a goal that every tribal college should obtain full accreditation from its respective sanctioning agency. Each college has had to travel the accreditation path alone, but morale and expertise have been shared liberally among AIHEC members to the benefit of all tribal colleges. This accreditation effort has resulted in 27 of the 31 tribally controlled colleges gaining full accreditation as institutions of higher education. The four that have not gained full accreditation are well on their way to achieving this goal.

Development

A relatively new effort by tribal colleges to build a diversified funding base is the founding of the Tribal College Fund. This independent but tribal-college-controlled foundation has raised significant funding over the past decade. From interest earned on the endowment, the foundation has awarded each tribal college a sum for student scholarships. Fitting these additional funding sources into the tribal colleges' fiscal designs allows the colleges to begin examining new programs, new curricula, new forums, and additional and advanced degrees for their students and communities. Sinte Gleska University, Oglala Lakota College, Haskell Indian Nations University, and Salish Kootenai College have demonstrated that advanced degrees are possible. Many of the tribal colleges are now studying such options for their colleges and are seriously considering whether to become four-year institutions.

This latest focus of tribal colleges, expanding to four-year colleges, is a strong indication of how optimistic these institutions are about their future growth and development. The need for bigger and better tribal colleges is borne out by an important statistic in Indian country: 56 percent of the American Indian population of the United States is age 24 or younger. This contrasts with the figure of 36

percent of the general U.S. population being in this youngest age group.[15]

Tribal colleges have also reached out to their non-Indian sister institutions of higher education and have been doing so since the founding of the tribal college movement. In the early days of the movement, non-Indian institutions acted as funding conduits to tribal colleges that had not yet earned accreditation candidacy. Non-Indian institutions also participated in cross-registration of students and lent faculty to the tribal colleges upon request. This cooperation has blossomed into full partnerships between tribal colleges and four-year mainstream institutions, partnerships that open to both kinds of institutions innovative science and mathematics opportunities, two-plus-two teacher training programs, distance learning and other telecommunications programs, and effective articulation and course transfer agreements. The recent land-grant status bestowed upon tribally controlled colleges will enhance the opportunities for tribal colleges and non-Indian institutions to continue their development of mutually beneficial partnerships.

Even with all the positives that have transpired over the past 30 years, major road blocks still face tribes that desire to develop and found new tribal colleges. The two major obstacles are funding for such efforts and maintaining the will to persevere in the face of all the difficulties that appear when trying to start such institutions. There are only 31 tribally controlled colleges serving tribes on isolated reservations scattered across the western and midwestern United States; yet there are approximately 300 tribal nations of American Indians. This means only about 10 percent of all reservations are served by tribal colleges. There is much room for growth in the tribal college movement, which hinges on pulling together adequate resources and leadership in Indian country.

Conclusion

The period from 1968 to 1998 has seen the number of tribally controlled colleges grow to 31, a remarkable record in the history of higher education in the United States. The positive impact of tribal colleges on the American Indian people and communities they serve is phenomenal, particularly as represented by the successes of their students in the workplace and in the mainstream institutions to

which they transfer. The impact seems even more powerful considering the pride and hope the colleges have spread throughout Indian country.

Tribal college presidents and AIHEC staff are asked frequently by tribal people from across the country, "How can we start our own college?" The willingness of the tribal colleges, AIHEC personnel, and friends and supporters of the tribal college movement to help others start their own tribally controlled colleges is the hallmark of a truly serious social and education movement.

The "can do" attitude exhibited by all associated with the tribal college movement is an example of inspiration and encouragement, and a worthy model to emulate. Tribal colleges still have a long way to travel to reach fiscal security, but relative to the most important higher education goal—staying true to the school mission—tribal colleges have succeeded in abundance.

Notes

1. Wayne J. Stein (Turtle Mountain Chippewa) is director of Native American Studies at Montana State University.

2. See U.S. Senate Appropriations Subcommittee, AIHEC testimony.

3. This list is updated regularly by the American Indian College Fund. See *Where Are the Colleges?* at http://www.collegefund.org/whereare.htm (12 December 1998).

4. A growing body of literature about tribal colleges can inform interested readers. A comprehensive source is Paul Boyer's *Native American Colleges*. Boyer provides a brief history of American Indian education and the tribal college movement before entering into a strong analytical presentation of where tribal colleges are today in their development and in carrying out their stated missions. *Tribally Controlled Colleges* by the author of this chapter explores the history of American Indian higher education participation and the first 10 years of the tribal college movement. This publication focuses on the first six tribal colleges, their founders, and their struggles to bring their colleges into existence. Also included is the history of the founding of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) and a brief discussion of the second and third waves of tribal colleges, which began in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Doctoral dissertations and journal articles are other good sources of information on tribal colleges. The past 10 years have seen the subject of tribal colleges chosen by a number of very knowledgeable individuals such as Janine Pease-Pretty On Top and Nathaniel R. St. Pierre. Both had much experience with tribal colleges before researching and writing their dissertations on the

subject. Journal articles are now numerous on tribal colleges and their functions. *Tribal College Journal* covers a wide array of topics related to tribal colleges; each issue usually focuses on a particular topic. Back issues are available by contacting journal editor Marjane Ambler at P.O. Box 720, Manco, CO, 81328; telephone 970-533-9170.

5. G. Gorman, Personal Interview, 22 November 1986.

6. See Stein, *Tribally Controlled Colleges.*

7. See Ramirez-Shkweqnaabi, "Roles of Tribally Controlled Community College Trustees."

8. Most community colleges, both tribally controlled and non-Indian schools, share common missions. The colleges are truly neighborhood schools with open admissions policies. Their goals are to serve the education needs of the community, provide academic courses that prepare students to transfer to four-year institutions, offer technical courses that prepare students for the work world, accept any high school graduates or GED certificate students, serve the underserved regardless of race, and work closely with community leaders to improve local economic conditions.

9. See Stein, *Tribally Controlled Colleges.*

10. D. Risling, Personal Interview, 23 November 1986.

11. Tiger, Personal Interview, 8 March 1995.

12. See Butler, "Tribally Controlled Colleges Can Start a Technical Career."

13. Bay Mills Community College, *1994-96 Catalog.*

14. See Stein, *Tribally Controlled Colleges.*

15. U.S. House Appropriations Subcommittee on Veterans' Affairs, AIHEC testimony, 1995.

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